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ABSTRACT

A description is provided of Rancho Santiago College's institutional research program, which uses a traditional centralized research model, augmented with alternative, decentralized approaches. First, background information is presented on the college and the role of the research office in management, decision-making, and educational support. Next, the organizational structure of the district is explained, with particular emphasis on the role of the director of research and planning within the college's Planning Council and Research Committee. After exploring the relationships between the research office and other college departments, the paper discusses the researcher's role as campus and team leader. The next section explains the operations of the centralized research model on campus, highlighting: (1) the annual development of a research agenda of specific priorities and studies to be conducted; (2) staffing of the research office by a full-time director and administrative secretary and up to 12 part-time or grant-funded staff members in various positions; and (3) reporting, disseminating, and utilizing research findings. After acknowledging that the research study process has differed slightly for each study conducted, the paper offers examples of two studies that exemplify the standard structure. Finally, the advantages and disadvantages of the centralized model are reviewed, highlighting the elimination of redundancy, the easy identification of gaps in research knowledge, and the potential for the isolation of the researchers from the programs and services they are studying. (AYC)

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The Traditional Centralized Model of Institutional Research

Its Derivation & Evolution at One College

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Rancho Santiago College
April 1989

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BACKGROUND

The Rancho Santiago College Institutional Research program enjoys the reputation among California community colleges of being a stable, long-enduring, highly visible, traditional, and centralized college function. The program has matured over the years and developed into a maximally effective, integral part of the college management team, decision-making processes, and educational support programs. This has been accomplished primarily by utilizing the traditional centralized research model, augmented with alternative approaches to conducting research.

Rancho Santiago College (RSC) serves 21,000 college credit students and another 15,000 continuing education students on two campuses, three major sites, and innumerable other community locations. The student body is very diverse in age, ethnicity, and educational objective, and the programs offered are very comprehensive to meet those diverse student needs. The college employs approximately 300 full-time faculty, serves a community population of 450,000, and is located in the urban-suburban center of Orange County, adjacent to the Los Angeles County metropolis. The college opened its doors in 1915; the institutional research program has been in place for at least fifteen years; and this writer has been part of the program for the last twelve years.

It has been possible to maintain a viable research program partially because the college and its administration have remained stable and financially sound. In the last ten years, there have been two district Chancellors, each serving for five years and both of whom have utilized a rational decision-making style and have valued institutional research, albeit using research in differing ways.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The success of this traditional centralized institutional research model reflects the organizational structure in which it exists and the leadership style of the top administrators. The Director of Research and Planning reports to the Chancellor, who is an advocate of institutional research not only as it exists to support administration but in its function as an integral support service for all levels and all departments of the institution. One rationale for the direct reporting relationship to the Chancellor is the belief that more objectivity can be maintained in research endeavors than if the research program fell within a separate division or unit of the college. Furthermore, we assume that this organizational structure reinforces the concept of institutional research as an institutional support function rather than one solely in support of, say, educational programs or administrative activities.

Further representing the broad nature of institutional research responsibilities and the concept of integration of this centralized function into the day-to-day operations of the college is the close working relationship between the Director of Research and Planning and the Chancellor's "cabinet".

The Chancellor's cabinet consists of the three Vice Chancellors, the Director of Personnel and the Executive Assistant to the Chancellor. The Director of Research and Planning participates frequently in the weekly cabinet meetings and other functions. Many research-related decisions are made within that forum. Regular interaction between the cabinet and the Director of Research and Planning keeps everyone informed to the extent that the institutional research office is aware of research-related institutional needs and the cabinet is aware of research findings and activities which may be helpful to their individual programs. As a

member of the Chancellor's staff, the Director of Research and Planning is also responsible for coordinating college planning. The importance of the relationship between the planning and research functions is recognized by having both coordinated in one office by the Director of Research and Planning. The cycle of planning--implementation--evaluation is enhanced with this structure.

To fully describe the model being presented, the collegial governance structure of the college and thus what is referred to as the relatively new "council structure" must be described. Six councils---External Affairs, Planning, Finance, Curriculum, Student Services, and Human Resources---include in their membership appointees of the faculty academic senate, the classified (non-instructional) staff liaison group, and the management staff liaison groups. Each council refers recommendations to a specified Vice Chancellor or the Chancellor, as is the case for the Planning Council. The Research Committee is a subcommittee of the college Planning Council.

The Director of Research and Planning is automatically, by position, a member of the Planning Council and the Research Committee. The Research Committee refers recommendations for action to the Planning Council. The Research Committee and the Planning Council provide additional mechanisms for interaction between the centralized research program and faculty and staff representatives of departments and employee constituencies. Not only is the utilization of research findings facilitated by the audience and participation available in the Planning Council and the Research Committee, but research becomes more relevant in topic due to the ability of the Director of Research and Planning to remain informed and participate in frequent and structured interactions with faculty and staff relative to important issues.

Relationship to Other College Departments

Relationships between the institutional research office and other departments become formalized as a result of the structures described above in that research activities are inherently credible because they reflect institutional priorities identified by the councils, the Chancellor, and the cabinet. For example, while the data processing and institutional research departments are not organizationally related, institutional research is assured of the full cooperation of data processing because institutional research requests for support reflect needs identified by the official, accepted decision-making bodies, the councils and the cabinet. Consequently, there are seldom any problems in departmental relationships or, in terms of this example specifically, in gaining access to, or control of, data processing services.

Good working relationships between institutional research and all other departments are crucial to the success of a research program. It is well known that institutional researchers battle uphill to overcome, what is to some the threatening and intimidating nature of research. Sophisticated management techniques, which include the use of institutional research, are not always consistent with academicians' notions of collegial governance. It is the responsibility of the researcher to consistently create mechanisms to "mainstream" the institutional research function. Inter-departmental relationships are facilitated at RSC through the organizational structure. Additionally, because of the stability and maturity of the college and of the institutional research program, these relationships are positive and solid. One cannot, however, ignore the informal, unofficial variables contributing to productive interactions between departments. Because it is critical that the working relationship between institutional research and data processing be a productive one, the individuals involved make every effort to be mutually supportive, including jogging together at noontime and exchanging invitations to holiday parties!

The Researcher as Campus Leader and Team Leader

The Director of Research and Planning, as can be seen from the above description of the model, operates within the construct of being an institutional leader and an active member of the college team, as opposed to being an isolated responder. There are some research-related issues currently, such as institutional effectiveness assessment and classroom-based research, which require leadership for initiation on the part of an individual or group of individuals. In the case of RSC, the Director of Research and Planning introduces topics of such importance to the appropriate groups, most often the Planning Council, Research Committee, cabinet, or individual departments.

Other De-Centralized College Research Activities

While the RSC model is a centralized one, it is enhanced by many decentralized components, which are increasing in number as research-awareness increases and which the institutional research office encourages as much as possible. For example, most program review is conducted at the department level. Many faculty and departments have taken it upon themselves to engage in research, such as student follow-up, program needs assessments, assessing student learning, or evaluating program effectiveness. Often the institutional research office provides assistance if requested. It is hoped that these types of activities continue to increase, further creating a research-pervasive environment.

IMPLEMENTING THE MODEL

Creating the Research Agenda

The model described above provides the structure by which research agendas are developed and through which research findings are disseminated. Also, if problems are encountered along the way, processes and forums are in place to address those issues.

A research agenda consisting of specific research priorities and studies to be implemented is developed annually. At the end of each academic year, the Director of Research and Planning reviews the status of current year projects to determine which need to be continued or augmented, assesses the need for research in new areas, and meets with the Chancellor's cabinet for their suggestions. A proposed agenda is then developed and submitted to the Research Committee, where it may be modified before being forwarded in recommendation form to the Planning Council. The Council reviews the recommendation, may again modify the agenda, and then forwards the finalized agenda as a recommendation to the Chancellor, to whom the Planning Council reports. The Chancellor discusses the recommended agenda with cabinet, and responds to the Planning Council and to the Director of Research and Planning.

This agenda provides the workplan for the institutional research office for the next academic year. It is referenced frequently in determining day-to-day priorities and in responding to additional requests for research which appear throughout the year. The agenda, an example of which is shown below, is primary in determining priorities. The agenda and the process through which it is developed is helpful politically when assistance from other departments is requested, when questioned regarding the purpose or intent of a study, when disseminating research findings, and in utilizing the findings in decision-making.

The agenda always includes the few studies that are completed regularly or on an annual basis. For example, each year we conduct research relative to transfer students,

demographics, enrollment trends and student characteristics, retention, and student outcomes.

Research needs which have not been identified on the agenda may surface throughout the year from various sources, including a council, cabinet, a faculty or staff member, an external agency, or the Director of Research and Planning. More often than not the Director is able to accommodate those requests, and if not, confers with the Chancellor, the Research Committee, or cabinet for assistance in prioritizing.

Annually, the district Board of Trustees is made aware of new research agendas and progress achieved towards completion of agendas. Often, the Director of Research and Planning reports progress directly to the Board at scheduled meetings, and written updates and publications are sent to them frequently.

1988-89 Research Agenda

New

1. Accreditation/self-study support
   a. Responsible for "Response to Recommendations" section
   b. Community demographic profile and presentation
   c. Institutional effectiveness assessment
   d. Community needs assessment
   e. Staff and student surveys
   f. Other support as requested
2. Classroom research support
3. Staff development and communication activities related to research
4. Student services outcomes research
5. Statewide Student Outcomes Study in math
6. California State University Fullerton/Rancho Santiago College cooperative research and student follow-up
7. Student success, Title V, & testing research

Continuing and Regular

1. Matriculation evaluation
2. Santa Ana and Orange Unified cooperative research and Wilson Adopt-a-School evaluation
3. Pathways to Persistence/retention studies
4. Student Trends and Characteristics
5. Historical Trends report/modification
6. Feeder high school statistics
7. Describe research
8. Issues Papers/institutional effectiveness
9. Program evaluation support

Staffing---Who Conducts the Research?

Regular full-time college-funded institutional research staff includes the Director and an administrative secretary. The staff also includes up to an additional twelve part-time or grant-funded employees in various positions: currently, a 100%-time, grant-funded research analyst; a 75%-time, grant-funded research analyst; a three-month, temporary 50%-time, grant-funded research analyst; a full-time English faculty member released 20% of teaching load this semester to conduct research in the research office; a 40%-time, grant-funded grants assistant; an adjunct Psychology faculty member who regularly works in the office; a 19-hour-a-week general office clerk; three student assistants; and an ROP high school work experience student. An administrative intern from the University of Texas at Austin community college leadership doctoral program was employed full-time by the office during the previous semester, and occasionally consultants are hired with grant funds for specific projects.

The combinations of part-time staff change from time to time. Diverse part-time staff have been used to provide flexibility in matching skills and staffing levels with current project needs, to maximize cost efficiency, and in the case of faculty, to bring the teaching perspective to institutional research. Since the faculty research-release-time program began five years ago at the initiation of the then new Chancellor, five faculty have served in that capacity, and they report being enriched from the additional perspective acquired through the experience. Non-instructional professional staff from other departments have also worked on a temporary basis in the research office. The synergism provided by the program has become invaluable to the goal of integrating the research program college-wide.

The Director supervises all staff and assigns projects according to the areas of interest and talents of the staff. Staff are assigned specific projects. Regular staff meetings are held, when schedules permit, to discuss each other's projects.

Research design and project implementation strategies are developed by the Director in cooperation with the assigned staff member, and implementation of the study is carried out by the assigned staff member. Prior to implementation, research designs are discussed with related college program staff and occasionally with the Research Committee or cabinet. The Chancellor is kept apprised by the Director of matters of significance.

In summary, the Director supervises all projects, is responsible for all phases of each project, speaks for all projects, and uses discretion in identifying the appropriate bodies with which to coordinate. The following individuals and groups, however, are

always principal players in most every research project: the Chancellor, the cabinet, the Research Committee, assigned research staff, and the staff of the program(s) related to the project.

When invitations to participate in cooperative college research projects are received, the Director of Research and Planning consults with cabinet and with related program faculty and staff. When the findings of those same studies are made available, they are forwarded and discussed with program staff.

Reporting, Disseminating, and Utilizing Research Findings

Preparing reports of research findings is done within the same process and bodies as used and outlined above. Staff of the program(s) involved in the studies are consulted prior to writing a report or after a draft has been prepared. Close contact is maintained with these appropriate staff throughout the duration of a research project. Drafts of reports are always reviewed with program staff, the Research Committee, and/or cabinet prior to publication. This review assists the writer in identifying the most important findings. (Ideally, by this time, the researcher is very familiar with the important issues of the study!) Research reports do not include program recommendations but identify in the executive summary or the conclusion sections, issues requiring further attention.

Program decisions are made with political, personnel, budgetary, and even intuitive concerns in mind, as well as by taking into account related research findings. Consequently, RSC research publications do not presume to include recommendations. The dissemination of clearly stated research reports and findings is important, however,

so that staff will understand the implications of the research in policy-making, which takes place at the program level and within the councils, the cabinet, and the Board of Trustees.

Dissemination of research findings is accomplished, again, through the Research Committee, the cabinet, and related program staff. Other means of dissemination are far-reaching and include regular institutional research newsletters distributed to all staff, presentations made to various college groups, presentations to staff development and "flex" classes, and open forum "brown bag" noontime sessions. One cannot saturate dissemination mechanisms. The membership of the Director on numerous college committees provides a vehicle for communicating the research perspective. The research advocacy of top administrators is also helpful. But most important, the development of a research-pervasive college environment where the research function is an integrated one is the most valuable means to enhance research utilization.

HOW THE MODEL WORKS

The structure described above for developing an agenda, conducting research, and disseminating findings represents the standard. The complete research study process - from identification of need, to design, to implementation, to analysis, to review, to publication, to dissemination and utilization - has differed slightly for each study conducted, however, for several reasons. First, RSC's new council structure has not yet completed its second year of operation; while the Research Committee has guided several studies through the review to dissemination stages and others through inception to analysis, it has not yet had the opportunity to guide a study through the complete process. The college organization is a healthy, fluid one and as such utilizes the structure as the ideal, remaining flexible to constantly changing variables.

It is also important to note that at RSC a large proportion of valuable institutional research efforts do not fall into the category of complete published research reports; drawing from the results of several studies as well as external sources to provide requested advice, or a presentation for a department are examples of another type of research activity.

Examples from processes of two studies exemplify the standard structure:

Prior to the creation of the Research Committee, one research staff member had been interacting frequently with RSC counselors and academic division deans relative to their development of new student assessment and course placement policies and procedures; he had conducted studies previously for them on this topic. This staff member determined through these interactions that there was a need for research examining the relationship between basic skills placement test scores and student

success in specific courses so that those new policies and procedures would be maximally effective, equitable, and justifiable. After consultation with the Director, this staff member, who was a faculty member working in the research office, conducted the study, which was designed in consultation with interested academic deans. Prior to publishing the potentially controversial results, he reviewed the finding with those same deans, who offered suggestions for the narrative of the publication. The findings, which were widely disseminated and which provided the cover story for a research newsletter, have been significant ingredients, along with other concerns and issues, of RSC's current course placement and prerequisite policies. The debates surrounding this topic have continued for months, as have the references to this study.

Since the creation of the Research Committee, however, this debate continues. Members of the committee recently requested that the topic of predictors of student success in courses be further researched since time had passed and conditions had changed since the first study. The Director had kept committee members apprised of similar research in other community colleges. As a result of committee member requests, the topic has been placed on the proposed 1989-90 research agenda, and the study has currently been assigned to the same staff member who conducted the previous study. The Research Committee and other groups have been updated about this study, which is currently in progress.

In these cases, the established organizational structures and processes were used to facilitate the success of the research activities, and thus, the implementations of the studies were problem-free and the findings in the first case were maximally utilized.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THIS CENTRALIZED MODEL

The centralized research approach provides the advantages of coordinated research activities, including: redundancy of research efforts is avoided; gaps in the body of research knowledge are readily identified; and the impact upon the institution of a coordinated as opposed to a fragmented body of knowledge is greater. The centralized office that includes at least one individual responsible solely for institutional research can devote undivided attention to the research program and not have to address other competing responsibilities in terms of allocation of time. Additionally, with the centralized model, faculty and staff, and even the community and Board members, know where to turn when a research-related need arises. Institutional research becomes an accountable, credible, sanctioned college function. A centralized office is more easily and most often staffed by professionals trained in conducting research. Study findings may be more objective and certainly are more credible when developed by an independent office. Also, with research centralized, it is easier to coordinate research with the planning function, as it ideally should be.

The major disadvantage of this configuration is that the function <u>is</u> separate and consequently the researcher may not be adequately familiar with the full range of perspectives and subtleties of the educational programs and services which may be addressed by institutional research. Furthermore, because the function is separate, the researcher is sometimes seen as an "outsider", and the threatening nature of research and evaluation is heightened. Institutional researchers need to remain "connected" to programs and services, to faculty and staff, and to decision-making and operational activities in order to maximize the contributions of institutional research.

At RSC, we believe that the advantages for a centralized approach are significant,

and we employ extensive strategies to assure the connectedness of the research function to the day-to-day operation of programs. And, the organizational structure facilitates the effectiveness and efficiency of this research program, which is ultimately achieved through the combination of a large number of important ingredients.

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